

9. Kindness

October 12th, 2017

When I get into a depressive funk, the best thing I can do for myself is to help someone else. I've assumed that service to others is helpful because it takes my mind off my own problems, takes me out of my own self-centered world and enables me to focus on external things. While this is true, it turns out that there's more to it than this. I've been studying up on kindness research. Various studies have shown that performing acts of kindness reduce blood pressure, increase dopamine and serotonin ("happiness hormones," the lack of which causes depression) and also increases oxytocin (the "love hormone," involved with relational interactions and bonding). It also lights up the pleasure- and reward-centers in the brain, as measured by fMRI. One study showed that performing acts of kindness to others was clearly effective in increasing positive mood and decreasing negative feelings, while being kind to oneself (by treating or indulging oneself) did not have any beneficial effect at all. Another study showed that it doesn't matter if you do something kind for a person you know and like, or a complete stranger; both result in measurable increases in happy hormones. In addition, it's been shown that just observing an act of kindness, without being personally involved, has the same beneficial results. Some papers go so far as to say that kindness to others is addictive, and there are good reasons why evolution might build such an addiction into us.

But this begs a question: by this stage in human evolution, if kindness is so clearly addictive, why is there still so much unkindness in the world? I started looking at research about meanness, and what I discovered is that meanness can be addicting, too.

Last year, a study at the School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital looked at aggressive behavior in mice. The details of the study are too complicated for me to really understand, all about chemicals and neurons and neurotransmitters and GABA receptors and stuff, but the conclusion, in the words of the lead researcher is this: "Our study is the first to demonstrate that bullying behavior activates a primary brain reward circuit that makes it pleasurable to a subset of individuals."

This correlates with research done at the University of Chicago using fMRI on groups of 16-18 year old boys. Half of the boys had a history of aggressive behavior such as bullying, fighting, and stealing confrontationally. The other half had no history of unusual signs of aggression. They showed

both groups video clips of someone inflicting pain on another person, and tracked their brain activity in real time. They were surprised by their findings. They found that both groups showed activity in the part of the brain that registers pain, which is associated with empathy. However, the aggressive boys also showed strong activity in the amygdala and ventral striatum, which are the areas linked with feeling rewarded, as well as very little activity in self-regulation areas of the brain. In short, the lead researcher said, “It is entirely possible that ... they experience seeing pain in others as exciting and fun and pleasurable.

So there is a subset of people (and I haven't found any suggestion yet on what percentage of the population) who, in effect, become chemically addicted to meanness.

And we also already know that children who are emotionally or physically abused at home are likely to become abusers themselves. Meanness literally breeds meanness. The kindness addiction has a lot to fight against.

There is a lot of information out there about teaching children kindness in school in order to reduce bullying. Talking about kindness and encouraging kids to do acts of kindness are helpful, but the most effective way of learning kindness, apparently, is to experience it. That is, if someone is kind to you, you are more likely to be kind to others.

Of course the issues of meanness and kindness are much more complicated than this, but in general, all else being equal, we can boil this information down to a simple conclusion: the way to increase the amount of kindness in the world is to be more kind to others. This adds your kindness to the pot, of course, but for every kind act you perform, you, the receiver, and anyone who happens to be watching all experience a physiological hit of happiness, and everyone involved is now more likely to be kind to others. It's a domino effect. It's good for everyone.

Well, this is no surprise is it. We all of us know this instinctively, and all I've done so far is offer some scientific explanation for why kindness is such a good thing to do. I do find it satisfying to discover that ethical principles that have been taught for thousands of years actually have physiological basis. It's not just theologically or philosophically moral to be kind. It's good for the survival of the human race.

I find this information to be deeply important to understanding Loving Kindness, the ninth of the 10 Most Excellent Practices. This practice, though, is so much more than just a call to be kind. Remember that these 10 practices are about “surviving the flood and getting to the other shore.” They are ways of becoming free from suffering, from clinging and aversion, from the tyranny of the fixed self. Increasing serotonin levels is not the main goal of Loving Kindness practice.

The practice of loving kindness requires that we feel and show kindness to all beings. That means not just those beings we like, but those we don't like also. Ill will towards someone causes separation. It creates a “them” and “me” in opposition to each other. It creates and solidifies “self,” from which suffering and consequently unskillful thought and action arise. If we refuse kindness to a single person, we are creating ill will and separation, and this will stop us short on our journey to liberation.

Another way of looking at it is this: We have been practicing mindfulness in order to “see things as they really are,” which is unfixed impermanent, and the consequence of a trillion trillion conditions in each being's existence. There is no essential core of a person. We are all made of the same stuff, we are no different than the bully down the street. What is different is the conditions of their lives and the way they have responded (usually quite unconsciously) to their own (usually unseen) suffering. Understanding this, knowing it for yourself, though the experience of deep observation and an open heart, causes the walls of separation to crumble. There is no separation. And if no separation, if we can see each other without listening to the stories and judgements and assumptions we make about others, then there is no ill-will toward another, no matter how inappropriately their response to internal suffering is manifested. If there is no separation and no ill will, then there is space for compassion and kindness. Then the call to show kindness to all, regardless of their behavior, regardless of their supposed evilness, is not difficult. In fact, compassion toward the most unkind people becomes the easiest to feel, because we can see the depth of their suffering in the extremity of their action.

Theoretically, this sounds logical, but instinctively, it seems wrong to feel kindness toward the despots and dictators and murders and irresponsible politicians. Why would we want to show them kindness? Because despot and dictator and murderer and politician are concepts and labels, not the person who is suffering. As Jesus said, hate the sin but never the sinner. This is not excusing

inappropriate behavior. It is recognizing that that behavior is a manifestation of a person's bondage to grasping, aversion, and ignorance.

This is a tall order. I find it hard to feel kindness toward the people who have caused me deep pain. But that's because I'm not totally enlightened yet. I still have pieces of self that get in the way of my seeing others as they really are.

And that's ok. This is a practice. We are working toward an ideal, but we start where we are and do what we can to cultivate this ideal. We continue to explore the impermanence and not-selfness of ourselves and others and move toward universal kindness from that end. And we consciously chose to be kind even when we don't feel it, and come at it from that side, too.

Knowing that my act of kindness toward a despicable person has a scientifically demonstrated beneficial impact on that person's ability to be kind helps me to take such actions. It's just a skillful means – a little mind trick I can use. I tell myself that although I don't think they deserve the little hit of happiness that my act of kindness will give them, that squirt of serotonin and dopamine and oxytonin making them a little more likely to be kind in the future. This is just a story I tell myself, but there is good research behind the assumption, and it helps me to be kind to those I am not inclined to be kind to.

And being kind to someone increases our happiness and increases our instinct to act kindly, and so the cycle goes. It may be that with enough kindness towards those we don't want to be kind to, we will start to understand the connection between us, the lack of difference between them and me. Loving Kindness helps us to understand the reality of existence. And understanding the reality of existence cannot but result in kindness to all beings.

Kindness Exercises

Try doing something kind for someone that you don't think deserves kindness. Notice how you feel, how they react, and how you react to their reaction. Don't be surprised if your kindness is returned with ingratitude or offense. Remind yourself that their actions are the consequence of their suffering. Think about the little push you are giving them toward their own addiction to kindness.